Dean Bernard Tschumi to Build New Acropolis Museum in Athens; Greeks Hope It Will Facilitate Return of Controversial Elgin Marbles

By Jason Hollander

Recently does an architect have to consider factors like international political debate and the history of western civilization when designing a building. However, Bernard Tschumi, dean of the School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, had to pay close attention to both before submitting his plan for the new Acropolis Museum, which will break ground this summer in Athens, Greece.

Set only 800 feet from the legendary Parthenon, the museum will be the most significant building ever erected so close to the ancient temple and was commissioned by the Greek government to be completed in time for the 2004 Summer Olympic Games in Athens. The structure will also be used in an attempt to help bring the Elgin Marbles back to the city after two centuries in a foreign country.

But to understand the importance of the future museum, one first has to examine the history of the land.

In 479 B.C.E., after two bloody battles, the Persians forced the Athenians to flee. However, they left the city and its sacred, now empty, Acropolis. There would be no temple, no oracles, no propagators of Athenian democracy. In its place was a building called the Parthenon for the Greek goddess Athena, who was the protector of the Greek people.

It would house a grand sanctuary, a mezzanine bar and restaurant. The Greek government chose Tschumi’s design in part because of the prominence his building will give these pieces. For years, one of Britain’s strongest arguments against returning the marbles has been Greece’s lack of a fitting place to house them.

“The Parthenon was the highest point of culture and worship,” says Tschumi. “The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity.”

The commission is one of the highest in profile that Tschumi has ever worked on, but his commitment to presenting a strong design was the only focus he had when preparing for the competition. “We asked him, can we provide a building that is as representative to our contemporary sensibility and technology as the Parthenon was at its time,” says Tschumi. “Architecture is not about form, but about defining a goal or concept. There is no sentimentalism in it. You cannot be sentimental.”

And, clearly, Tschumi was not. Still, he entered the contest with low expectations, believing the prospect of winning almost impossible, because he thought technical and bureaucratic constraints would not allow him to realize his vision. But his commitment to the idea of making the building “first and foremost a manifestation of natural light,” pleased the Greek government more than any other. When the call finally came good, his assistant in New York, he was on a site visit in Florida. “I’m glad I was already sitting down when I heard,” says Tschumi. “I was stunned.”

Now that the celebration is over, the work has begun. Tschumi says the time frame he has to complete the museum in is “unbelievably fast,” but that finishing is possible. “Indeed, it requires major efforts from both the bureaucrats and construction companies, but it can be done. [Construction] can be a very fast process, but sometimes slow at the same time.”

Tschumi feels certain that the approval stages will be a top priority for the Greek government as the finished museum and the Olympics will present an opportunity for the country to show a fresh face to the rest of the world. “Clearly it is part of an ambition on the part of Greece to modernize itself,” says Tschumi. “This is the first step.”

The New Acropolis Museum will be set just below the Acropolis in Athens, only 800 feet away from the legendary Parthenon. Greece. Indeed, the debate will likely intensify as the Olympics draw closer and Athens finds itself under an international spotlight.

For Tschumi, several other unique challenges exist on the project. He has to build the museum very carefully on top of an excavation site where an ancient Christian town was recently unearthed. Officials will monitor the process to make sure none of the structures are disturbed. To complicate matters, he has to consider and accommodate for the regularity of earthquakes, which the area suffers. Of course, there is also the pressure of building a major structure that will stand right in the shadow of the Parthenon itself.

“The Parthenon was the highest point of culture and worship,” says Tschumi. “The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity.”

The Parthenon was the highest point of culture and worship, says Tschumi. “The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity.”

The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity. The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity.

The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity. The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity. The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity.

The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity. The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity.

The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity. The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity.

The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity. The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity.

The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity. The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity.

The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity. The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity.

The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity. The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity.

The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity. The museum is a place that records those achievements. The museum will stage the work of that era while asserting a new identity.